Beware the queen bee

By KAREN KISSANE

"The details of your incompetence do not interest me. Tell Simone I'm not going to approve that girl she sent me for the Brazilian layout. I asked for clean, athletic, smiling; she sent me dirty, tired and paunchy. And RSVP yes to Michael Kors' party. I want the driver to drop me off at 9.30 and pick me up at 9.45 sharp . . . Also, tell Richard I saw all the pictures that he sent for that feature on the female paratroopers and they're all so deeply unattractive. Is it impossible to find a lovely, slender, female paratrooper? Am I reaching for the stars here?"

Meryl Streep as magazine editor and fashionista Miranda Priestly in the film *The Devil Wears Prada*.

REVENGE is meant to be a dish best served cold, but *The Devil Wears Prada* is hot. It is a chick-flick about a she-devil editor at a top fashion magazine. One day she decides to take a chance and hires "the smart fat girl" as her junior assistant.

The perfectly normally endowed new staffer finds herself in an office of ridiculously thin women ("I'm just one stomach flu away from my goal weight," says one) who are forever erupting into cries of "Prada! Armani! Versace!"

Even more ridiculous are the demands of her imperious mistress: "Find me that piece of paper I had in my hand yesterday morning," or, "I need 15 skirts from Calvin Klein."

What kind of skirts?

"Please bore someone else with your . . . questions."

According to *Time* reviewer Richard Schickel, "Streep is, predictably, a marvel as Miranda, flapping her wings, nipping at her perpetually frightened flock, hissing her contempt for their frightened ways."

The film is based on a book of the same title by Lauren Weisberger, a former assistant to *US Vogue* editor Anna Wintour, who is widely believed to be her model for Miranda Priestly.

In a show of stylish defiance, Wintour attended a preview screening dressed in — *mais oui!* — Prada. The film is due out in Australia next month and is already an American box-office hit.

The immaculately turned-out Wintour once had a cream pie hurled at her face by animal protesters who were angry that her magazine promoted fur.

The character of Miranda Priestly is a pie in the face for women in leadership positions who have had to battle the stereotype of the powerful woman as dragon lady, bitch and ballbreaker. The film also plays on the idea of the catfight, a phenomenon dear to the hearts of unreconstructed men who like to believe that, deep down, women dislike and hate each other.

Real female bosses don't act like that, surely?

In fact, painful as this might be for the sisterhood to admit, some do. Female lingo has long had a name for it, too: such a woman is a queen bee.

It is true that both water-cooler wisdom — the views you get in a straw poll in an office — and social science research suggest that women managers tend to have a more caring and sharing approach to managing staff than men do.

In organisations where women made up at least 30 per cent of the top three ranks of management, according to a study by Professor Colleen Chesterman at Sydney's University of Technology, staff said they found their working environments more congenial, collaborative, goal-focused and people-oriented as a result. They also believed women could manage in tough times and were prepared to make hard decisions such as cutting staff and rationalising budgets.

Professor Leonie Still, of the Centre for Women and Business at the University of Western Australia, says male managers tend to take charge (problem-solving, delegating, influencing upward). Female managers take care: supporting, rewarding, mentoring, networking, consulting and team-building.

"He would rather be taking a client or a boss out to lunch," she says. "He builds relationships outwards, looking for the next promotion. She prefers to look at maintaining relationships within the team . . .

But it is difficult in organisations where female leadership has not reached the "critical mass" of 30 per cent.

In stressed, competitive workplaces dominated by men, even the women managers adopt a hard-edged macho style, according to research on high-tech companies by Professor Judy Wajcman at the Australian National University. "Some of the women identified with women, but other women feared being labelled by being seen to be interested in women. It's fear of discrimination. It's as if they were telling the men, 'I'm not like them, you can trust me because I'm in a different category,'" she says.

Meredith Fuller is a counselling psychologist specialising in career development. In her practice, Fuller sees both the queen and the workers she has stung.

What drives her? "She often has a great sense of entitlement, which can come from having been daddy's princess. The entitled princess strategy is flirtatious and seductive, with a high edge of manipulative anger. She will play the cutesy game. She's charming and witty but when she's not turning it on, she's full of rage. Men want to help her and don't understand why other women don't like her. She has an enormous saccharine smile but she will hunt out anyone who's any good, work them like a dog, hide them away, present their work as her own and get rid of them. It's search and destroy."

The second kind of queen bee is desperate to prove that she is better than everyone else, "and that can come from a childhood that left her with poor self-esteem. Rather than feeling entitled, this woman is a bitter and twisted competitor. Her game is usually, 'I'm going to be a better boy than the boys. I'm going to look fantastic and I don't care who gets punished in the process.' It's all about her, in a very narcissistic way, and she can be very aggressive, intimidating and scary."

The queen bee sees her problem as the tiresomeness of others in her hive: "I have got these idiots working for me! They're all hopeless! They're all envious of me, passive aggressive towards me, they are all out to get me, they are so resistant!" She perceives herself as someone who's a real star, who's special, and isn't it tragic that there are so many mediocre people in the world and they all happen to work for her?

Fuller says that underneath her apparent arrogance, the queen bee is desperately insecure that she is not good enough and that she will be found out.

"Some go to the extreme of fearing they will end up a bag lady on the street. They are so afraid they will collapse that they encase themselves in a suit of armour; you know, the ones who've got the $10,000 suitcases and the $3000 shoes! They talk about their accoutrements as being their secret weapons, so that they can walk into the awful meeting with bravado. 'I'm sassy, I'm brilliant, no one's going to mess with me.'"

As actor Lily Tomlin says — the trouble with the rat race is that even if the woman wins, she's a rat.

But women who aren't rats won't stay with women who are. Catherine Millest, a partner at accounting firm Deloitte, says she has a friend at another company who has just resigned because of a queen bee. "She was interfering with this person's time outside work, constantly contacting her outside of work hours. She made it very difficult; she was demanding and controlling. This person had very strong feelings about having to take action, she doesn't have another job to go to."

Executive recruiter Kathleen Townsend, who helps in the hiring of chief executives, general managers and managing directors, says this sort of behaviour is rare. The importance of people skills is now much more recognised than it used to be. "The Gordon Gekkos and other people who were standing on others to get to the top are increasingly less attractive to companies."

She has occasionally struck "tolerance of appalling behaviour and massive ego", which was associated either with creative enterprises such as movies or with some big-billing partners in law and accounting firms whose ability to attract revenue was highly valued. But they went through junior staff quickly, and tend to be found out now by the relatively recent practice of the exit interview.

It is only when women become leaders in large numbers that we will learn how much dysfunctional female behaviour is personal to the individual, and how much is a response to the power dynamic of the individual workplace.

In fact research, Professor Leonie Still found that when the tables were turned, junior men could behave manipulatively with women bosses. "The man will flirt and flatter and play the submissive male to get what he wants, then he will go around and boast to everybody that he can get anything out of the boss — and there's always a sexual connotation to it."

For Professor Judy Wajcman, the question is not so much whether men and women manage differently, but the way in which women are judged more harshly for doing what men do.

"When men are decisive, they are seen as strong, directive managers. When women do exactly the same thing, they are seen as ambitious and hard.

"They are also less easily forgiven for blunders, according to Elizabeth Bryan, president of the NSW branch of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

They tend to be cautious managers because they know there is little margin for failure for them: "If a woman makes a mistake, you get very, very quick judgement — 'She couldn't hack it, she couldn't handle it.' You just don't get the same thing with males, they're just not criticised in the same way," she says.

There will undoubtedly be chats around the water cooler about *The Devil Wears Prada*.

Women on the defensive can always quote Meryl Streep on where she found her inspiration for the role of uber-bitch Miranda: "I thought of all the most wilful studio honchos I know, mostly men."

How to avoid the sting

If your manager is a destructive queen bee ...

1 Never be alone with her for important exchanges. She will lie in the form of "not remembering" what you remember about what was decided.

2 Transparency is your weapon because secrecy is hers. If you find yourself shafted by her in a meeting, say sweetly in front of colleagues, "I am really confused that you said that, because I thought we had agreed that this and this was happening. Can you help me understand what has happened here?"

3 Counter her attempts to undermine by dividing and conquering and working individuals very hard, by talking to colleagues and finding support. Don't allow yourself to be isolated by self-doubt.

4 Be protective of your privacy. Make sure not to leave your work open, because she will look over your shoulder and her eyes will "vacuum" your desk.

5 Stay calm. Many staffers who must answer to queen bees tolerate ill-treatment for months and then explode over something minor. She will turn this into evidence of your emotional instability.

6 Protect yourself with records. Write confirming emails after verbal exchanges and cc others; always print out and keep hard copies of communications.

Source: Meredith Fuller, counselling psychologist in career development.

WHAT WOMEN SAY

LOUISE ADLER
CEO, Melbourne University Publishing

LOUISE Adler often quotes American author Nancy Kline in speeches about women and business: "Invited into the seats of power, we agree largely to leave behind and devalue our women's culture. We respond with 'Thank you. I accept your invitation to enter the boardroom and agree to put all my energies into . . . lying (and call it diplomacy), into obsession (and call it loyalty), into exploitation (and call it resourcefulness), into conquest (and call it reward), and into control (and call it power). I will not cry or . . . expect tenderness . . .' I think that's women's experience. But I take the view that women can lead differently, that they don't have to behave in the way men do."

ELIZABETH BRYAN,
NSW branch president of the Australian Institute of Company Directors

"YOU need a critical mass of women to create a woman-friendly environment, in a lot of professions, the graduates are over 50 per cent women. By the time you reach managerial and professional status, about 44 per cent are women. The next stage up is executive management and that drops to 16 per cent women. CEOs are only 2.3 per cent women. It's fear of female power. Most of the senior women come up through support roles, where they are not seen as a threat. But you probably won't get a woman running the core business of the company. As soon as you are a line manager, you have real power and are therefore a real threat. Before we get real changes we will have to have lots of women, not just the occasional extraordinary one."

KATHERINE MILES,
partner with accounting and consulting firm Deloitte

"THERE is still some degree of reticence in women about putting themselves up for promotion, particularly from senior manager to director, and from director to partner. Often it's because they are starting on a family and don't believe it's possible to have a family and be a partner at the same time. About 12 months ago, a couple of people had a word in my ear, and then changed my mind about that. I have a part-time partnership; I have every Friday off because of my children. When you are first in management, it's certainly a learning curve asking people to do things for you. Women will often be a little bit more apologetic — 'Can you do this as a favour for me?' rather than 'This needs to be done and can you do it?'

KAREN KISSANE

LINKS
- www.randomhouse.com
- www.aim.com